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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 6, 2019

Proper 22, Year C:
Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Psalm 37:1-10
2 Timothy 1:1-14
Luke 17:5-10

Giving thanks for the sincere faith of Lois and Eunice

Our epistle reading this morning was from the Second Epistle to St. Timothy. It is one of what we call the “pastoral epistles,” meaning that it was written by St. Paul to a pastor, in this case, Timothy, leader of the Colossian church. Paul is a seasoned St. Paul by this point, his missionary journeys having come to an end. Now, he is in Rome, in prison, writing to a younger man, Timothy, with encouragement and advice, mentor to protegee.

We usually don’t get to know very much about the personal lives of the people we read about in the New Testament. Every once in a while, however, a stray, intriguing, detail appears. This morning, I would like to bring our attention to one of them. St. Paul begins his epistle in the customary way: announces who he is; to whom he is writing; a greeting; and then he says nice things about the recipient. One of the things he says about Timothy, here, is, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.”

“Your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice.” With this, we see a development that has happened in the community of Jesus followers, when the early Church has gotten a little less early. St. Paul’s conversion story is famous: while he was a persecutor of the Church, Jesus knocked him of his horse, struck him blind, and made him listen to the preaching of the gospel by Ananias. Following that, Paul became a Jesus-follower as well, with the zeal of the convert; Paul was never one to do things by half-measures. No doubt this involved a dramatic break with the community in which he had been a member: his associates at this point were also probably persecutors of the Church and likely looked askance, at least, at his new affiliation.

But something different has happened with Timothy. Timothy is a third-generation Christian. Where Paul had to break with his community, Timothy was raised by a mother and grandmother who were both followers of Jesus. And, Paul recognizes them as people of “sincere faith,” a faith sincere enough, strong enough, that it facilitated Timothy’s faith as well. Faith is a gift from God, to be sure. But one of the ways God can give that gift is through the testimony and example of others, and that includes mothers and grandmothers.

I take two things from that. First, it occurs to me that all of us have Loises and Eunices in our lives. For some people, those will be actual mothers and grandmothers. For others, they will be other people, whose manner of life and “sincere faith” shows us what a Christian life can look like. Pope Benedict XVI at one point said that the only testimony of the Church is the beauty of its art and the lives of its saints. In that context, I think he meant saints like St. Francis, who renounced significant wealth and embraced a life of worship and service. Famous, big-time saints. But I would say we could also say that about the everyday saints, like Lois and Eunice. What I like about Benedict’s statement is that it acknowledges the social aspect of the Christian faith. I don’t think

anyone has ever been argued into faith. I don't think any late-night bull session has finally converted the skeptic who wants to stay up late and poke holes in the religious life. (Though I do think that Christians should be willing and able to engage in those discussions; that is its own testimony.) Instead, I think what has been much more convincing to many of us is the example of a Christian life lived faithfully, a reflection of "the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus," the "sincere faith" of Lois and Eunice.

From the beginning, the testimony of the Church has been the testimony of its members, starting with St. Paul himself. But there are others, too. I know that reading Augustine of Hippo's autobiography, the *Confessions*, has had a great effect on many people. It is the story of how he himself struggled with faith. I remember reading the autobiography of the modern spiritual writer, Thomas Merton, whose book *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in part about his struggles coming to faith while he was in college. I was in college when I read it, and it inspired me greatly, even when I didn't particularly understand it. (He and I lived in the same dormitory, fifty years apart, which I rather self-importantly found significant.) Therefore, one of the things we should do is give thanks that people like Lois and Eunice exist, whether they are people we are related to or not. The formation of the mature Christian requires the example and support of others, women and men of "sincere faith." If we have encountered any of them, whether in person or in print, that is something to celebrate and give thanks for.

Second, it also reminds us that we are Loises and Eunices as well—or that we could be. Whether we think of ourselves as saints or not, our sincerity is our testimony.

I don't think this means that we have to be perfect, or perfectly faithful. Paul doesn't say that Lois and Eunice are perfect. He says they are sincere. And I imagine that they were sincere in both their spiritual successes as well as their spiritual struggles. But it was their sincerity that they passed down to Timothy. If they had tried to present themselves as perfectly faithful, as entirely sanctified in the faith, that wouldn't have been sincere (not to mention, not true). I don't know any faithful person that I look up to who presents himself or herself that way. The Christian life can be hard. A person can doubt. I remember a few years ago when Mother Teresa's journals were published, and there were ugly news stories about how she talked about her doubts, her religious doubts, and her thinking she was a fraud. Some corners picked up on this like it showed that none of it was true, that she wasn't all she was cracked up to be. But to any mature Christian, that doesn't show that she was a fraud; it shows she was human and, at least in her journals, between herself and God, she was honest. That goes a long way.

That seems to be a virtue of having someone close to us, as Timothy had Lois and Eunice, rather than someone we just see from afar, like Mother Teresa. Timothy would have seen Lois and Eunice up close. He would have known of their doubts and their difficulties, known them well, seen them in their most intimate and domestic and quiet moments, alongside their sincerity of faith. I think this is another way of saying that they were honest and authentic in their faith—and that their honesty and authenticity was handed down to Timothy, their grandson and son.

But whether we are Lois and Eunice to our own children, or to someone else's children, the fact remains that we have that kind of function, whether we acknowledge it or not. (The place of godparents in the customs of the Church show that our role isn't limited to our own children.) People see us, as Christians. And we are called not to perfection (in this life), but to sincerity and authenticity and honesty. One of the most alarming, panic-inducing things about being a parent is when you see your own behaviors being copied by your children. So it is in the community of faith. Lois and Eunice and any of those who have been around a while—including many of us—will be copied, in good ways or bad, by others.

That is both a challenge and an opportunity. Not everyone is called to the office of prophet, of herald or apostle or teacher. Paul was; Timothy was. Not everyone is called to renounce all

material things and live a life of poverty and service. St. Francis was; Mother Teresa was. But all people are called to sincerity of faith, the “faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

The point about being Lois and Eunice is that this sincerity of faith isn’t something that is only internal to us. It isn’t something that only happens in our minds and hearts. If you want an example of this manifested faithfulness, look to the United States Marines. Their motto is “semper fidelis”: always faithful. But their faithfulness is not only an internal state or a mental commitment. The Marines don’t just sit around, feeling faithful or talking about how faithful they are. Their faithfulness is reflected in their actions, and it is inspiring. A sincere faith manifests itself in a certain way of living.

For the Church, I think of two main ways that we manifest a sincere faith. One of the things that the New Testament foregrounds is forgiveness. A community that forgives each other is a great testimony to a sincere Christian faith: we forgive one another because God forgave us first. We really believe that, that God forgives us in Christ; that sincere faith is reflected in our forgiveness of each other.

The other way of living I would think of would be a posture of thanksgiving. We really believe that God has forgiven us first, has loved us first, has abolished death for us; God is God for us. And, because we really believe that, we are in a constant state of thanksgiving—not just internally, but as manifested in our actions.

One way we do that is by coming together each Sunday and celebrating the Eucharist; the word Eucharist means “thanksgiving.” Regular attendance at worship is a way of showing our thanksgiving, a reflection of our faith.

Another way we show our thanksgiving is by giving sacrificially to Christ through his Church. A community that gives sacrificially to Christ through his Church is a community that shows a sincere faith by its actions. We have been blessed, marvelously blessed: everything we have we have received from the hand of God, by his grace. This is a great gift, and it compels a great expression of faith, an orientation towards thanksgiving. And people are watching. Our fellow Christians who are still being formed in the faith are watching, to see whether we really mean what we say—and therefore whether they should mean it, too. Non-Christians are watching, to see whether we really mean what we say.

Part of this posture of thanksgiving is in a generosity in giving to Christ through his Church. If we really believe that Christ overcame death and in the fullness of time will set all things right, then we should be constantly giving thanks, “not only with our lips, but in our lives,” because “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Note that Jesus says, your treasure is where your heart “will be.” Not that it has to be there already; that is a lifelong journey. But the posture of thanksgiving, including through giving back to God some of what he has given us, will not only reflect our faith, but effect it as well. It will put our heart in the right place.

We have been blessed with the examples of Loises and Eunices in our lives. And we have both the opportunity and the challenge of being Loises and Eunices to others. We do that by being sincere, authentic, and honest in our faith, a faith that is not only internal, but external as well, exhibited in our forgiveness of one another and our sacrificial giving to Christ’s Church.